

Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature, by Nicole Nolan Sidhu. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. 320. Hardcover. \$69.95.

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The title of Sidhu's book draws upon modern laws concerning uninvited and disruptive public displays of genitalia, acts in which power dynamics exist between the perpetrator and the witness(es), and in which taboos concerning sexuality and sexual organs are at play. It is therefore a fitting title for a study that examines similar power dynamics and taboos in Middle English literature, and that does so with an eye to what modern readers can learn about their own culture from their medieval predecessors.

Sidhu first provides a history of obscene comedy in medieval culture, especially in Old French fabliau, and then traces its emergence in Middle English texts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. She identifies obscene comedy as a Foucauldian discourse whose semantic instability provides for medieval authors a mask or blind for political commentary, but cautions that the obscene was primarily produced and consumed by a literate elite, which could limit its subversiveness. She delineates the boundaries between medieval and modern understandings of the obscene, noting that medieval understandings encompass a range of taboo items associated with sexuality and bodily functions, as well as other non-normative behaviours such as "disobedience and resistance to the established order" (25). These two categories frequently combine in the figure of the unruly woman, a central strand in Sidhu's argument, and the questions concerning gender, sexuality, and misogyny she explores through this figure are crucial to her concluding discussion of modern pornography.

The book has two main parts, the first of which examines the introduction of obscene comedy into Middle English literature in the works of two established writers, William Langland and Geoffrey Chaucer. Chapter 1 focuses on three episodes of Langland's *Piers Plowman*—"the Meed episode, the third vision, and the impotence vignette" (36). Sidhu identifies Langland as an innovator, despite his more conservative tendencies, because of how deftly he weaves the obscene into complex philosophical discussions that question contemporary socio-political issues. More specifically, she suggests that Langland employs obscene comedy to critique corrupt uses of secular and ecclesiastical power, as well as those who wield that power.

In Chapter 2, Sidhu demonstrates how Chaucer takes up the generic form most associated with the obscene, the fabliau, and, blending it with classical legend, deconstructs it from within. For Sidhu, Chaucer's emphasis on the ideologies that underpin the governing power structures renders his work more radical than Langland's, as does his dismantling of the misogyny inherent in the genre. In a fresh look at the *Reeve's Tale*, she explains how Chaucer reveals the destructive nature of a system driven by coercive violence and an ethos of competition. Yet Chaucer's reworking of the fabliau, Sidhu argues, has limits: his interest in the condition of women derives primarily from his interest in subordinate males. She suggests these limits account for his inability to deconstruct the misogyny that permeates his *Legend of Good Women*.

Part 2 moves into a discussion of fifteenth-century authors and texts that inherit the obscene. Chapter 3 highlights the clerical writer John Lydgate and his texts *Mumming at Hertford*, the *Troy Book*, and *Fall of Princes*. Lydgate, Sidhu suggests, took considerable pains to distance his use of the obscene from that of his predecessors, even as he remained heavily indebted to them. She demonstrates how, despite the blatant misogyny and the maintenance of

established power structures present in his works, Lydgate brings the monarch into the domestic realm, creating a community of men, regardless of class, united by their shared problem: women. For Sidhu, this move renders the cleric a radical innovator: he breaks down associations between obscene comedy and the domestic, and offers a new vision of the relationship between elites and commoners, one that anticipates the Early Modern parallels between household and state.

Sidhu next turns to the *The Book of Margery Kempe* and posits that Margery's use of obscene comedy, especially the unruly woman, is more intentional and self-conscious than has been previously acknowledged. Chapter 4 outlines how Margery employs the obscene to expose the misogyny of the church and to discuss the broader implications of its persecution of Lollards. Sidhu sees Margery as unique because her focus on gender politics is explicit in its concern with the condition of women, especially non-conformist and spiritually gifted women. She also suggests that the *Book* provides a progressive example of companionate marriage, one based on partnership that ultimately, for Margery, provides greater compassion than the church.

Chapter 5 explores the use of obscene comedy in biblical drama. Here Sidhu explains how unruly women such as Mrs. Noah or the mothers from the "Massacre of the Innocents" plays operate as constructive forces: they are contributing members of middle-ranked households and society, often nonconforming without being licentious, and voice the concerns of those who experience violence and injustice at the hands of the secular and ecclesiastical elites. Sidhu suggests these texts demonstrate an awareness that gender norms are constructed and vary by class. They also, she notes, have the greatest subversive power: as each performance is a different iteration of the text, meaning is highly fluid; further, each performance has witnesses beyond the class that creates and disseminates the material.

In her conclusion, Sidhu explains how censorship from the Early Modern period on increasingly pushed the obscene out of the public and into the private realm, and presents the medieval examples of her study provide as a model through which modern culture can break down the misogyny and racism that has shaped the obscene—primarily pornography—over the past two centuries. The key, she argues, is to make public again that which has become private, to expose it and reimagine it in new, productive ways. Her study is thus timely and necessary, not just because of the questions surrounding pornography in modern culture, but also because of the recent resurgence of misogynistic rhetoric and actions in the public and political spheres. Now more than ever, we need to combat these forces. Sidhu's text provides a possible approach.